

Ashes of Empire.

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

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An Open Door.

The sun, imbedded in terraced banks of cloud, glimmered like a slender over Meudon woods, the battery smoke, drifting across the southern forts, turned to pink and pearl. Soft thunder rumbled among the westward windmills, silencing the rattle of the guns. The haze that veiled Valerian; the river slipped past misty, meadowed shores untroubled by a keel.

The house on the ramparts was very still; Bourke sat in his room by the window, reading. Hilde stood at his elbow, looking out over the valley. Below him, the Prophet, tilted skyward, loomed, ominously swathed in its canvas winding sheet. The sentinel stood motionless on the parapet, head turned toward the hazy hills, where a thin column of smoke mounted straight up into the sky. Once a little whirlwind of bugle music from the Porte Rouge fled the street; once the wind veered and the heavy detonation of the canonade set the sally air a-quake for a while.

The expectancy of evening brooded over all, over the massive ramparts, over the fresh grassy thickets on the glacis, in an imperceptible wind that freshened and cooled the face, yet scarcely stirred a leaf.

Presently there came a clatter of small balloons on the stairs outside, the discreet patter of stockinged feet, a knock, a happy whisper. It was Red Riding Hood, come for her evening visit. Hilde kissed her dutifully.

"You bring twilight with you, little one," she said, turning back her thick black curls. "The scarlet ribbon—it is very becoming—do you know it?"

"Monseigneur Bourke gave it," said the child, nestling closer to him. "Come, let us sit down, you say?"

Hilde absently drew a chair to the window; Red Riding Hood leaned against his shoulder. They looked out over the valley in silence.

"I might have been perfect," said Red Riding Hood presently, "but Hilde, Hilde could not give me my lesson today."

"Hilde would not," said Hilde. "Why?"

"I do not know," said the child with a little sigh. Hilde bit his lips; his heart turned sick with the futile bitterness that follows—too late, the knowledge of consequences, consequences that spread like ripple down the hall and out to the river.

"Hilde, Hilde will bear your lesson tomorrow," he said, looking from the window.

"Tomorrow," repeated the child. He said nothing more. Perhaps he was thinking of those endless tomorrows, passing, passing, each one troubled as the spreading rings in a pool disturb the placid peace that once reigned there. And he had not eaten the stone.

"Look at me," said the child. He turned his head, his dark eyes met his own.

"Is it sad?" she asked. "Yes, little one."

She held his hand a moment, then let it drop. He scarcely noticed it. A moment afterward he raised the child, chide of her little bobbed down the stairs outside. An hour later, a bitter hour, he followed, descending the worn stairs silently, fearing the very silence that he dared not break.

Yollette moved about the dining room slowly, as if in a dream. She had passed the hall and out to the river store, where Hilde knelt among the wicker cages. When she saw him she rose to her knees, hiding her burning face in her hands. He bent down to her, touched her forehead with his hand, and she trembled as if by one he untwisted the slender fingers, closely interlocked, and at last he raised her head to his. But she would not look at him, her sealed lids pressed the lashes tightly to her cheek.

tree and roof, filled the street with restless chirping that stirred the caged birds in the shop. Linnel answered thrush, inches whistled wistful answers to the free twittering of the sparrows in the dark rustled and ruffled; a blackbird uttered a still, thin plaint.

And Hilde, who, when her own heart was free, had never understood captivity, now, when she listened, understood, and her own imprisoned heart answered the plaint of will-caged things.

To her half-spoken thought he answered; together they gathered all the feathered wild things into one great wicker cage. The parrot's pale eye was veiled in scorn; the monkey flouted freedom with a grimace, shivering and mouthing and stopped forward. Out over the valley the bird flock rushed, bore to the left, circled, rose, swung back on a returning curve, but always rising higher, higher, until, far up in the deepening evening sky, they floated, and chose their course, due south.

She watched them driving southward. She could tell the inches by their undulating flight, the thrushes, the clean-winged starlings. She sighed contentedly. She had opened the door of pity when love opened the door of her heart.

"Look," whispered Hilde, "there is one little bird that will not leave us."

"It is dead—God forgive me," faltered Hilde. A rush of tears blinded her. She knelt beside it on the grass—a frail mound of dust and feathers, silent and still.

"Freedom and death—life is so sweet—so sweet," she whispered. "And somewhere in the south, where the others have gone, there is summer, eternal summer—life—life!"

"Winter is close," he answered, soberly. With an unconscious movement he drew her to him. He bent and searched her changed face.

The wind, too, had changed. There was frost somewhere in the world, and the solemn harmony of the canonade swelled with the solemnity of a funeral dirge, stirring a broken feather on the dead bird's stiffening wing.

CHAPTER XV.

The Anatomy of Happiness.

That night they closed the empty bird store; Hilde locked the wooden shutters into place and looked them. Hilde carried the monkey into the dining room and installed it in a wicker corner. Mehmet Ali, the parrot, sat on the perch, looking at Hilde. It mattered little to him when he passed his pessimistic days. Weariness and a vicious melancholy had marked him for their own. Even when he ate he ate as if he were making an ironical comment on the food he ate.

Curiosity he had subdued, sinister solitude he courted, and bit when it was denied him. There had been a time in earlier days when he was the "Marseillaise"—when he whistled "Vive l'Empereur." Now for a week he had been muttering and muttering among the noisy feathered inhabitants of the bird store, dreaming, perhaps scheming—for he had the air, slow eye of the Oriental.

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lation of the capital. Was it not possible to rapidly mass the two corps of Vinoy and Ducrot to crush the few thousand men of the advance guard? The most effect of such a stroke would have been stupendous. But in this first engagement under the walls of Paris the deplorable system was inaugurated and invariably followed in all subsequent operations around Paris, fighting without a fixed objective, forcing new troops not sufficiently habituated to fighting, and on the contrary, when a serious object was in view, operating with insufficient numbers and inadequate artillery.

On the 18th of September, when Vinoy's corps fell back, the Prussian investment began, the various railroads were cut and at 3 o'clock in the afternoon the last train from Paris for Rouen left the St. Lazare station. From every direction the German masses poured into the country; the price of Saxony advanced from the north, saluting St. Denis with a thousand trumpets; the prince of Prussia rode up from the south through Fontenay aux Rues and woke Aunay woods with the hurrahs of his horsemen.

Two vast crescents formed the circle; the ring was solid at Versailles in the east; the other gap closed at St. Germain. Then on the 19th of September Ducrot was attacked in the south, flanked, driven pell mell under the Châtillon redoubt, where the great forts of Vanves and Montrouge shielded him. At 4 o'clock the few cannoners spiked the last guns in the unfinished Châtillon redoubt and retired. Clamart, Villejuif and Meudon swarmed with Prussian cavalry. Night came and Paris knew that its southern key had been stolen when

Hilde, standing close beside her, said: "You regret nothing, Hilde?"

"After a long while, she answered, "Nothing—and you?"

"What have I to regret?" he said in an altered voice, unconscious of the axiom and its irony—unconscious that he stood there, the mouthpiece of his sex, voicing the dogmas of an imbecile civilization. She bent her head and looked at him with a smile on her shoulder. All the million questions that stirred and flutter in a love-wrung heart awakened, trembled on her lips, all that she would know, all that she should know, all



THE BEAUTY OF LIFE WAS UPON HER, IN HER EYES.

the Prussian flag crept up the shattered staff on the ramparts of Châtillon.

So was lost the southern key to Paris, the great unfinished redoubt of Châtillon. Let those high officers of engineers remember—let others in high places of the land remember—and he remembered.

Scarcely had the investment of Paris been completed when the humiliating interview at Ferrières between Jules Favre and Bismarck became known to the public. Had Jules Favre carefully considered the matter, had he offered terms, for example, as follows:

First—An indemnity. Second—The dismantling of one or two of the eastern forts. Third—The cession of Cochin China. Fourth—The cession of a few ironclads.

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But it was not to be. The poor representative of the republic left the Prussian headquarters with Bismarck's harsh voice ringing in his ears, and the next day all Paris knew that it was to be a struggle to the death.

Stung again into action, Vinoy, supported by the forts, hurled a division of the Thirtieth corps on Villejuif and carried it. On September 30 Chevilly and Choisy-le-Roi were attacked. Again the fate of the Prussian artillery militia was advanced gained at Villejuif. The sphere of action had scarcely been enlarged at all.

From the ramparts of Paris these first engagements under the walls were scarcely visible to the people—scarcely audible save for the thunder from the supporting forts. A high rampart of the Montrouge fort to Arcueil; beyond it, denser volumes of smoke poured up into the sky from l'Hay. At moments the wind brought the crackle of the fusillade through lulls in the canon din—scarcely louder than the crackle of a bonfire. This was all that the Parisian could see or hear from the southern bastions.

Great crowds of women and children watched the infantry passing through the dense masses of excited people; the cannoners swung their things and chanted gaily:

Ga! Ga! sermons nos rangs, Epanance De la France Ga! Ga! sermons nos rangs, En avant, Gaulois et Français! To the air, "Ga! Ga! Mariens Nous!" and the franc-tireurs took up the song savagely:

Quoi! les monuments chéris, Histoire De notre gloire, S'écroulent en débris, Quoi! les Prussiens a Paris! and the people roared back the chorus: Ga! Ga! sermons nos rangs!

the points mounted the bastion and called the class of instruction to the breach.

In the evening the ramparts burned bright, the dusk of the street gleamed like powdered rubies; long, mouse shadows stretched across the grass, soft and velvet as the bloom of a purple plum.

When Hilde had finally looked the shutters he clung up and unhooked the sign of the shop, Hilde watched him without speaking. He lifted the signboard to his shoulder and carried it into the darkened shop. To Hilde it was the last scene in the prologue of a drama—the drama of a new life just beginning. She went into the shop and looked at the sign that was standing upside down against the wall.

"It is one of my landmarks," she said; "they are all numbered, one by one. Yesterday my Sainte-Hilide of Carhaix fell and broke on the tiled floor, and I shall miss the birds, too." She added hastily: "I am glad that they flew away; you must not think that I regret anything."

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wood smiled at her and drew her to him. "When did he go?" he asked.

"Today," replied Red Riding Hood. "He is a brave soldier, but he is a little slow."

As the child spoke her dark eyes glowed, for at last he had been justified in his daughter's eyes—this squalid, drunken father, glorious in the shining garments of resurrection—a home-made uniform with epaulettes. War, the great purifier, had come with blessings to Red Riding Hood and the child of chance, whom chance allotted to her father, sowed gilded bread and brave buttons on her father's clothes, and that he might be fine among the fine; that he might no longer be ashamed among men; that he no longer need be silent when men spoke of honor and virtue and brave deeds and the soldiers of France.

"He will fight until he dies," said the child seriously.

"Pray God he may not die," said Hilde gently.

"I will die," replied Red Riding Hood with that quiet conviction that makes children sometimes feared.

Late that night Hilde, sleeping on his tumbled bed, was awakened by Bourke. "Jim, there's a man at the door below; Red Riding Hood's father is dead."

"He was drunk—he fell from the drawbridge at the Porte Rouge."

Hilde threw on his coat and went gravely to the little room where Red Riding Hood lay asleep. "Little one," he whispered. She felt for his hand in the dark, clasped it in both of hers and pressed her wet face to the pillow.

"It was a brave death—a soldier's death," he whispered. She wept; it was the one pleasure her father had ever given her, his death. She thought of the man himself and wondered why she wept. Hilde, too, wept, and she answered his unasked question:

"I weep because I have nothing to weep for. Go, now, and leave me with my happiness."

CHAPTER XVI. Betrothed.

In Paris the days succeeded each other with few incidents and moderate excitement. Suspense had given place to certainty. The city was completely hemmed in by an unseen enemy, unseen save for the smoke of burning villages on the horizon, yet that enemy had as yet done nothing. The same and the Tuileries were still standing, cabs, cars, omnibuses ran as usual, and the boulevards and cafes were thronged.

True, there had been a few alarms in the interior of the city. A petroleum storehouse caught fire on Montmartre through accident, a chemical factory blew up in the Rue de Valenciennes and killed some people. Everybody was certain that Paris was absolutely isolated from the rest of France as far as receiving news was concerned. But the Parisians could send news by pigeons and balloons. They sent something else, too, in balloons, loaded with 200 pounds of M. Gambetta, destined to fill the Mid with his fanfare and gasconading, destined to flop in the Prussian dragnet and blind himself and his fellow victims with the turmoil of his own flopping, destined inevitably to aid in the disgrace and destruction of a brave incapable more stoned against than sinning, the innocent, fat-brained scapegoat of a frenzied nation—Bazaine. If there ever existed such a thing as a patriotic demagogue, partly genius, partly mountebank, Gambetta must remain the model of an ex-actor, and yet the court-martial of Bazaine has left the stain that tarnishes the name of Gambetta and makes it stink a little, too.

The courage and splendid fortitude that brightened the gloom of the year of punishment, the terrible chastisement of a guilty nation, was displayed by the hero and preacher of the hour, the politicians, the men in high places, the government must look elsewhere for eulogy. Thiers agitated by senile convulsions, Gambetta bawling nonsense, Rochefort brilliant and useless as a will-o'-the-wisp—and quite as easy to catch. Favre, self-effacing, patriotic, unselfish, but too much of a philosopher, too good, living amid hallucinations, a monument of martyred indecision—will some historian or writer of fiction—they are synonyms—be pleased to glid the letters of these great names. And while the romancer or historian—whichever you will—tries to do it, let him rigold the name of Renan, as he sits feeding himself at Torloni's in the starving city, spitting platitudes with De Goncourt. See him as he eats! His chin is fat, his belly fatter, his fat white fingers are spread out on either knee, the eagle ostentatiously unmindful. He preaches universal brotherhood; he is on good terms with humanity. Incidentally he talks much, and familiarly, about our Saviour—and eats, eats, eats.

In the beginning of his career Gambetta created for himself a name. It only took a few weeks to create it. He followed Rochefort's methods with equal success. He was very popular in France. He was a talented lawyer. Again and again in the Corps Legislatif he showed himself to be not only an orator, but a statesman of a certain kind. In the beginning of the revolution he was useful; he was the lawyer that connected the parti avance and the bourgeoisie. He was opposed to Trochu. He sailed away in his balloon to Tours, where he felt that his sphere of action ended only with the frontier. He was mistaken. His colleagues proved useless. He set up a dictatorship that ended by sterilizing and making ridiculous his former energy.

"Did this young tribune of the people remember that the greatest glory God can accord to man is the glory incomparable of saving his country? Had he a soul sublime enough for such a mission? And the purity of his intentions, the simplicity of his life, the elevation of his character—were they so notorious that he should be deemed worthy of such an honor?"

Let France answer her own.

The third sortie ended in the fire-swept streets of Bagneux, and, for the third time since the siege began, the army of Paris retired to the city, having accomplished nothing except a few thousand deaths, highly commended by "Olivier Militaire." Bourke hurrying back to the city, had attempted to telegraph this news by way of Bordeaux. Then, when he had spent the remainder of the day in similar and equally vain attempts, he gave it up and went back to the house on the ramparts, where he found Hilde, pocket stuffed with the latest despatches, pacing the hallway and smoking furiously.

"It's just as I told you," he said when he saw Bourke; "we're cooped up for good. If you had listened to me and gone on to Versailles—"

with the next sortie, and if our troops get through we must go, too."

"How about getting back?" asked Hilde. "Chance it," Hilde was silent.

"You're naturally considering Hilde and Yollette," began Bourke. "Naturally," replied the other with a tinge of irony.

"So am I. Now, Jim, we are either war correspondents or we are not. We can do nothing here, that's certain. If we try to take risks and try to get through the lines we stand every chance of early and uncomfortable decease. But if we're paid for it we follow the next sortie we may get through with whole skins. That's more to my taste and fairer to the journals. If we stay here it is true we can chronicle the siege and watch for a hole in the German lines, but I think we ought to resign from our journals in that case and risk selling our stuff outside if we can't get it through beforehand. That's the only honorable course I see—either get out of the city or stay, resign and turn free lance. What do you think?"

"I will not leave for the present," said Hilde, resolutely.

"Good," replied Bourke, promptly. "Neither will I while these young girls are here alone. Of course, I know you'd say that. Our papers will have to wait until we can get a chance to send in our resignations and reasons. That can't be helped. It was a practical mistake for us not to go out of the city when we had the opportunity. It's tough on our journals, but I've decided not to accept last month's salary, and that will square things. I'll not draw any cent, either. Have you money, Jim?"

"I've a little money," said Hilde. He took out a notebook and pencil and calculated. Presently he looked up.

"We shall need our salaries before the month is out," he observed.

"Then," said Bourke, "one of us must do the work for both. One of us must go with the next sortie and get through if possible."

"And—the other?" asked Hilde.

"The other ought to stay here as long as there is danger. Jim do you want to stay?" He forced a smile as he spoke. Hilde said nothing. Bourke's embarrassment was increasing. He reddened and stood up.

"Do you care for Hilde?" he asked, with an effort. Hilde did not answer. Bourke unbuckled the spurs from his riding boots and walked backward and forward, swinging the leathers till the rowels jingled like tiny chimes. After a moment he came up to Hilde, who was sitting moodily on the stairs.

"I should like very much to stay, Jim—if you don't mind—very much."

Hilde did not move.

"It is—for Yollette," added Bourke, crimson to the temples, "but if I thought you loved Hilde, I would go. If you wish it I will go tomorrow."

Hilde's face was set and pale, his heart sank under an overwhelming rush of shame and indignation. He had not intended to ask Hilde to go with him, but he could not answer the confidence of his comrade, bitter shame that he should be willing to accept a generous man's sacrifice, a man who loved for the first time in his life and who loved honorably. Bourke continued to talk, but Hilde never imagined that Yollette was anything to me; I never thought of that sort of thing. It came before I knew it, Jim. You see, I never before cared for a woman."

Hilde understood English," repeated Hilde in dull surprise. He had not even suspected it; suddenly he realized that he had learned nothing of Hilde—absolutely nothing, except that she loved him. Bourke slipped his riding crop into his boot, picked up his despatches and moved toward the stairway.

"It is—for Red Riding Hood; I think I saw her skirt," he said. "Jim, shall I go with the next sortie?"

Hilde turned and mounted the stairway with his comrade.

"Come into my room in an hour; I'll tell you all," he said, and left Bourke at the head of the stairs.

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